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ABSTRACT

Guidelines are provided for higher education institutions that are developing or evaluating academic review activities for their graduate programs. The guide presents the critical components of a graduate program review, focusing on the philosophy, principles, practices, and policies entailed, and discusses the advantages and disadvantages of different review methods. The five sections of the guide cover the following areas: (1) the purpose of program review; (2) a rationale for program review; (3) a definition of program review; (4) issues which should be addressed before beginning the program review, such as locus of control, master's versus doctoral programs, relationship of academic and professional programs, coordination with accreditation reviews, and multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary programs; and (5) the structural components of a program review, such as administrative support, departmental self-study, use of questionnaires, external reviewers, and student participation. Three resources for conducting program reviews are described. (LPT)

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Foreword

Participating in the design and conduct of graduate program reviews is a major responsibility of graduate deans. While specific processes used in these reviews may differ considerably among institutions, certain basic ideas tend to characterize the general approach: it is collegial in the broadest sense of the term and is based on the concept of peer review; it is scholarly in that it seeks to define questions whose answers will increase understanding of the program; it is comprehensive in that it views the program under review as being connected both to other programs within the university and to the intellectual issues of the discipline at large; and finally, it is dynamic in that it results in actions that will improve graduate education.

This booklet contains a wealth of information and commentary on graduate program review, ranging from philosophy and principles to policies and practice. It is intended to serve as a guide to institutions that are developing or evaluating their program review activities, and to be a useful reference to anyone involved in the review of graduate programs.

Jules B. LaPidus
President
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Summer 1990

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Introduction

The review of graduate degree programs in the United States and Canada takes place in a number of ways and can result in a variety of outcomes. Reviews are conducted by individual colleges and universities on their own initiative, by or at the request of system offices at the state/provincial levels, or because they are, in effect, mandated by state or provincial regulation. They can be simple or complex, inexpensive or costly, brief and pointed or endlessly protracted; they can be an integral part of an institution's planning and budgeting process, or a token gesture which has no effect on future plans. They may be viewed with eagerness as a way to show off stellar programs or focus attention on long-neglected needs, or they may be viewed with antagonism as useless busy work or a threat to a department's or program's very existence.

Program review is seen differently by many people not because it is unnecessary or unimportant, but because it is difficult to do constructively and well. Most faculty and administrators agree on the need to evaluate graduate programs periodically in some way; if they object, it is usually to the process. If it is to be done at all, program review should be done carefully. Otherwise, more harm can come than good: institutions and agencies have the impression that there is true accountability where there is none; faculty members become disenchanted with the process and withdraw their time and support; departmental self-studies turn into "shelf-studies"; programs which genuinely need recognition or improvement languish unnoticed; and precious institutional and public resources continue to be invested poorly.

Conversely, when program review is done well, everyone benefits. Faculty and administrators gain an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of their graduate programs; there is clear agreement on goals for the future; budget decisions are based on academic priorities; institutions are accountable to their students, the taxpayers, and other supporters for the quality of their product; and finally, but most important, programs improve. Program review moves institutions toward excellence in a collegial way—which is why scholars gather together to form colleges and universities in the first place.

The purpose of this document is not to define a single, correct way to conduct the review of graduate programs; that must and should vary by institution, state or province. Rather, the intent is to describe the principles of good practice which should be present in all program reviews and to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of different review methods. If the principles are followed, the process will be a successful one, regardless of the method chosen.

Definitions

Because program review at the graduate level takes so many different forms, it is impossible to describe it in terms that encompass every circumstance and institutional setting. Therefore, for the purposes of this document, the following terms will be used:

Institution: any organization which engages in program review—most often a college or university but also a coordinating agency at the state or provincial level.

Graduate program: any degree program at the post-baccalaureate level, including professional programs.

Department: the academic and administrative unit in which the graduate program is housed and which has ultimate academic responsibility for it. This includes departments that are involved with one or more graduate programs, and departments that cooperate with interdisciplinary and joint programs.

Department Chair: the administrative head of the program or department.

College or Faculty Dean: the dean who has budgetary and personnel responsibility for the program to be reviewed, e.g., the dean of arts and sciences, the dean of applied science, or the dean of a professional school.

Graduate Dean: the dean or director of the graduate school or the administrator who has primary institutional responsibility for graduate education.

Academic Vice President: the institution's chief academic officer. In the case of many Canadian institutions, this may also be the president/vice-chancellor of the university.

Purpose of Program Review

There are many reasons why institutions conduct reviews or participate in provincial or state-wide evaluations of their graduate programs. The primary purpose of all program review is the improvement of graduate programs, as measured by the quality of the faculty, the students, library and other educational resources, the curriculum, available facilities, and the academic reputation of the program among its peers. Institutions of higher education, like individuals, require regular scrutiny and self-examination to improve, and the systematic review of academic programs is an integral part of this process of improvement. In the face of the many external pressures on institutions to review programs—from government, system offices, public interest groups, and accrediting societies—and the many internal pressures in the form of budget adjustments, space needs, and organizational restructuring, it is imperative that this primary purpose be kept in mind.

In addition to the improvement of graduate programs, program review, whether at the state, provincial, or institutional level, has several associated objectives or goals. For the individual university, program review helps in long-range planning and in setting both institutional and departmental priorities. It gives administrators and academic leaders critical information about the size and stability of a program, its future faculty resources and student market, its equipment and space needs, its strengths and weaknesses, and its contribution to the mission of the institution. It helps set goals and directions for the future, and ensures that overall academic plans and budget decisions are based on real information and agreed-upon priorities, not vague impressions or theoretical schemes.

Program review also provides a mechanism for change. Graduate programs, like all social structures, evolve slowly; intellectual differences, bureaucracy, time pressures, vested interests, concern for survival, and simple inertia all make change difficult. By creating a structured, scheduled opportunity for a program to be examined, program review provides a strategy for improvement that is well-reasoned, far-seeing, and as apolitical as possible. Changes in graduate programs which are made in the heat of the moment or in response to a particular action (e.g., annual budget decisions, turnover in adminis trators, individual faculty promotions, student admissions decisions, or new course approvals) seldom contain the kind of solid information, broad collegial involvement, and careful thought which a program review promotes, and which is necessary for lasting program improvement.

From an external point of view, program review has two very important purposes. First, it provides a mechanism whereby universities are accountable to society for their activities and for the quality of their programs. State and provincial governments, funding agencies, private donors, taxpayers, and tuition-paying students can

be reassured through the program review process that the institutions which receive their support have graduate programs of high quality which are regularly reviewed and revised, and which are responsive to the needs of the society and consistent with the aims and objectives of the universities involved.

Second, program review assists the universities in their efforts to garner financial, philosophical, and political support from state or provincial legislatures, state and federal funding and re¸ulatory agencies, coordinating boards, and other constituencies. The information gathered in the review process, and the assessment of program strengths and needs, provide strong and compelling evidence of the quality of graduate programs, the areas of greatest need, and the foundation on which future improvements should be built. This information can and should support external decisions about resource allocation, enrollments, special initiatives, research grants, and even private gifts. The stronger and more careful the program review process, the more persuasive the results.

Why Have Program Review?

Graduate education is replete with evaluations. Faculty are evaluated for salary increases, for promotion and tenure and, in many institutions, for membership in the graduate faculty; students are evaluated for admissions, performance on comprehensive examinations, and degree completion; courses are evaluated as they are added to the curriculum; and facilities and financial resources are scrutinized annually in the budgeting process. Program review, however, provides the only comprehensive evaluation of an entire academic program, integrating all of the elements which contribute to its success.

While it is true that the reviews conducted by professional licensing or accrediting associations are also comprehensive in scope, they have special goals which may or may not coincide with those of the institution. Accreditation reviews often are extremely focused on the existence of certain minimum standards adequate for licensure or accreditation. They do not necessarily contain the broad academic judgments and recommendations for change in program direction which should come out of a program review.

Graduate programs are dynamic; they change constantly as faculty come and go, the student applicant pool increases or declines, degree requirements are eased or tightened, and as the academic discipline just naturally evolves. Although degree programs are usually reviewed carefully when they are first proposed, once they are approved they may never be evaluated again. Constant scrutiny is unhealthy for any program, but periodic, thorough review will ensure that the program has lived up to its original goals and will identify key areas in which it should be strengthened. It will also, if necessary, identify programs which should be cut back or terminated.

In addition to these intrinsic reasons, some states and provinces have initiated periodic program review as part of a legislative mandate or provision by a governing board or commission. These reviews may be conducted by the institution itself, by an external agency funded by the government, or by a special body established by the universities. In such cases, the intrinsic justification for program review is supplemented by real external requirements which may influence the frequency and structure of the process.

Academic program review is therefore an elaborate and often costly process, but it is a necessary part of ensuring the continuing quality of graduate programs and of identifying ways to improve them. There is no adequate substitute.

What Is Program Review?

Program review may take many different shapes and forms, but it always has certain key characteristics.

1. In the United States the process is usually internal, initiated and administered by the universities themselves. It may be conducted at the state-wide or system-wide level; most frequently, however, state agencies mandate a requirement for program review but leave the actual review to the institutions. In Canada, where the provinces are constitutionally responsible for education, including post-secondary education, there is considerable variation. In one province—Ontario—all graduate programs are reviewed regularly in a seven-year cycle by a central organization (the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies), which is administered and funded on a cooperative basis by the fifteen provincially-supported universities. Similarly, the Conférence des Recteurs et Principaux des Universités du Quebec (CREPUQ) is responsible for reviewing new graduate programs in its jurisdiction. Program review in the other provinces tends to occur at the level of the individual institution.

2. Program review is evaluative, not just descriptive. More than the compilation of data on a particular graduate program, it requires academic judgments about the quality of the program and adequacy of its resources. It goes beyond an assessment of minimum standards to subjective evaluations of quality by peers and recognized experts in the field.

3. Review of graduate programs is forward-looking; it is directed toward improvement of the program, not simply assessment of its current status. It makes specific recommendations for changes which need to be made in the future, as part of departmental and institutional long-range plans.

4. Departments engaged in program review are evaluated using academic criteria, not financial or political ones. They are scrutinized on the basis of their academic strengths and weaknesses, not their ability to produce funds for the institution or generate development for the state or province. Finances and organizational issues are certainly relevant in the review, but only as they affect the quality of the academic program (e.g., low faculty salaries, lack of laboratory equipment, rapid turnover in department chairs).

5. To the extent possible, program review is an objective process. It asks graduate departments to engage in self-studies which assess, as objectively as possible, their own programs. It brings in faculty members from other departments and often from outside the institution to review the self-studies and to make their own evaluations, using independent judgments. It is part of an established, public process in which all graduate programs are similarly reviewed, so the tendency to use a review for

political purposes—to highlight only the best programs or punish the worst—is minimized. Although no such process can be completely objective, a well-constructed program review leads to a careful, arm's-length evaluation by at least some individuals with no vested interest in the results.

6. Program review is an independent process, separate from any other review. Reviews conducted by regional or professional accrediting associations, licensing agencies, or budget committees are separate and distinct, and cannot substitute for program reviews. Data collection and parts of the departmental self-study may often serve a number of review purposes, and there is much to be saved in time and effort by timing a program review to coincide with an accreditation or other external review, if possible. However, to be effective, program review must be a unique, identifiable process, which stands on its own, draws its own set of conclusions, and directs its recommendations to the only individuals who have the power to improve graduate programs: the faculty and administrators of the institution.

7. Most important of all, program review results in action. Growing out of the reviewers' comments and recommendations, the institution develops a plan to implement the desired changes on a specific, agreed-upon timetable. This plan is linked to the institution's budget and planning process, to help ensure that recommended changes actually get made, that necessary resources are set aside, and that the program's goals fit into the institution's overall academic plans. If no action results from the review, departments soon lose interest in the process, the quality of the product deteriorates rapidly, and large amounts of time and money are wasted. In addition, other less objective and collegial ways of making decisions arise, and the advantages of systematic program review are lost.

Successful program review, then, is a process of evaluation which has all of the above characteristics. It provides answers to the following kinds of questions:

- Is the department advancing the state of the discipline or profession?
- Is the teaching or training of students useful and effective?
- Does the program meet the institution's goals?
- Does it respond to the profession's needs?
- How is it assessed by experts in the field?

Clearly, this list of questions can be supplemented by others, and the emphasis given to any particular question depends on the mission of the institution and the individual graduate program. But these are the kinds of questions that program review is designed to address.

Issues to be Addressed Before Beginning

There are a number of issues that need to be resolved before the first review begins. They have to do with how the reviews will be conducted, their scope and timing, who will be involved in the process, and the relationship with other review activities. While there is no single right way to conduct a program review, there are advantages and disadvantages to each of the approaches described below, depending on the institutional setting.

Graduate versus Total Program Review

Where graduate and undergraduate degree programs exist in the same department, institutions differ significantly in whether they choose to review graduate programs alone or as part of an overall review, including undergraduate programs. There are clear advantages to each.

Reviewing graduate programs alone allows for a careful, thorough, in-depth review. With the narrower focus of just graduate education, both the department in its self-study and the review committee in its report can give more attention to those quality indicators which are unique to graduate education: content of graduate seminars, quality of the research experience, productivity and professional involvement of graduate students, thesis load of faculty members, and professional contribution of graduates. Reviewers can be chosen who have special expertise and experience at the graduate level, and they can reasonably be asked to spend more time ferreting out answers to those subjective questions about program quality found only through personal interviews with faculty and graduate students.

Since graduate programs tend to be smaller than undergraduate ones, they easily get lost in the sheer numbers of enrollments, faculty teaching hours, and space and equipment needs, unless they are reviewed separately. And the questions that are asked, if focused primarily on undergraduate issues, are often irrelevant to or paint an extremely inaccurate picture of the graduate program. By reviewing graduate programs separately, institutions are forced to devote time and in-depth attention to them, and to design criteria for evaluation which are uniquely suited to the graduate level. A separate process ensures that graduate programs will not be viewed simply as costly extensions of baccalaureate study.

On the other hand, there are advantages to reviewing graduate and undergraduate programs together. There is enough duplication of questions and data (e.g., faculty qualifications, space and facilities, departmental organization, focus of the discipline) to justify combining the reviews into one. A single review can produce significant savings in time and money, and create immense good will by not subjecting

departments to constant examination. A combined process may be more efficient, since in most cases the same faculty will prepare the self-study and the same reviewers can be asked to examine both the graduate and undergraduate programs. Also, the two are clearly interdependent; matters like faculty teaching loads, program and departmental budgets, facilities, and the quality of the teaching assistant experience cannot be properly assessed without information on both undergraduate and graduate programs.

Whether graduate programs are reviewed separately or in conjunction with undergraduate programs, two basic principles apply. First, graduate programs must be looked at with a separate set of standards and criteria, and by those who have an understanding of the unique demands of graduate education. Undergraduate work involves breadth; graduate work, focus. Excellence in one in no way guarantees excellence in the other. Second, if undergraduate programs are also present in the department, they must be taken into account even in graduate-only reviews. For while the two are different, they are seldom, if ever, unrelated. They are part of the same organic unit—the academic department—and both draw their strength from the same faculty source.

Locus of Control

Who conducts the program review depends largely on whether the review is internally controlled, or conducted externally as part of an ongoing cycle of reviews. When the process is internal, involving graduate and/or undergraduate work in an entire department or school, it is usually conducted by the academic vice president's office. A university- or college-wide faculty panel is often appointed to establish criteria and procedures for the review and to receive any final recommendations. That panel may conduct the review itself or appoint a subcommittee, depending on the size and complexity of the institution, the number of reviews scheduled, and the expertise needed. Clearly, in this model, panel and subcommittee members need to be competent to judge both graduate and undergraduate programs.

When graduate programs are reviewed internally but separately from undergraduate programs, such reviews are often initiated and conducted by the graduate dean. He or she may use the standing graduate council for this process or, like the academic vice president, appoint special review committees. After the process is completed, recommendations then come back to the graduate dean and the graduate council, for recommendation to the college or faculty dean and the vice president.

If the review process is undertaken externally, it is usual for the scope to be restricted to the graduate level. In this case, the external reviews are based on a common set of information provided by each program, and the review is undertaken by a committee representing the collectivity of universities. This committee may seek the advice of expert consultants if required. The graduate dean acts as the crucial point of contact between the external appraisal committee and the university.

Regardless of who conducts the review process, the following principles apply:

- Whether the review is of the graduate program only or an entire academic department, all reviews should involve the college or faculty dean.
- The graduate dean should play a major leadership role in all reviews, either as initiator or key participant.
- The essential participants in any graduate program review are: the academic vice president, college or faculty dean, graduate dean, department chair, departmental faculty, review committee(s), and graduate students in the program.

Without the involvement of all of the above constituents, the process cannot succeed.

Master's versus Doctoral Programs

In those institutions with research-oriented master's and doctoral programs in the same department (e.g., English, economics, and physics), there is no question that both should be reviewed simultaneously. The similarities in curriculum, faculty, research facilities, and often, student body, would make separate reviews illogical and costly.

However, practice-oriented master's programs which do not tie directly to doctoral work (e.g., the M.B.A., M.S.W., or M.Ed.) deserve careful, separate attention. Whether it leads to a doctoral program or not, a master's degree should have its own academic integrity; it should be seen neither as simply a step toward the doctoral program nor a continuation of undergraduate work. A master's program may have a different student clientele and different degree requirements, place graduates in different kinds of positions, and even involve different faculty than the doctoral program in the same department. The institution should examine the unique characteristics of each such master's program, and develop criteria for evaluation that are appropriate for that program.

Relationship of Academic and Professional Programs

Traditional academic (research) programs and professional (practice) programs often exist within the same graduate departments, e.g., business, education, and engineering. Professional programs typically have very different educational goals from academic programs and are often reviewed independently for accreditation. Should institutions attempt to review such programs together? Do professional programs which are subject to separate accreditation review need institutional review as well?

Although they may have separate student bodies, separate degree requirements, and sometimes separate faculties, academic and professional programs within the same academic unit should be reviewed together. They are, by definition, part of the same discipline, or grow out of the same disciplinary tradition; they are housed administratively and budgetarily in the same unit; and they necessarily draw from each other's resources to complement their intellectual programs. Like graduate and undergraduate programs, they are separate but interdependent, and budget, facilities, and faculty appointment issues which affect one almost always affect the other.

It is essential, of course, that they be reviewed using different criteria since their missions and standards of excellence are inevitably different. To use the same criteria is to do both a disservice.

Given these differences, it is tempting to substitute professional accreditation reviews for internal review of professional programs: the criteria are nationally recognized and established by the profession; the reviewers are external to the institution and experts in their field, and the process is usually careful and thorough. However, a professional program which meets national accreditation standards does not necessarily meet the institution's criteria for excellence or conform to its mission. A program could be superior by national standards but completely inappropriate for the local community, or an excessive drain on resources needed for research. Conversely, it might not meet minimum accreditation standards on such matters as faculty-student ratio but tie closely to the overall mission of the institution and satisfy that institution's quality standards. In either case, institutions which have professional programs need to review them in the same fashion as other graduate programs and not delegate that responsibility to an outside agency or organization.

Coordination with Accreditation Reviews

While program reviews need to be separate processes from accreditation reviews, it is possible and desirable to juxtapose them. The two can seldom be held simultaneously, but much is to be gained by conducting both reviews during the same academic year. Many elements of the departmental self-study and of the data collected are the same, as are, of course, such items as faculty curriculum vitae; thus, significant time, paper, and effort can usually be saved by combining these portions of the reviews. Also, in the case of institutionally-based reviews, a campus review committee may find the report of an accreditation or other external team extremely valuable as it considers its own recommendations. In the case of some state-wide or system-wide reviews, the internal review may be required to be conducted before or at the same time.

When both kinds of reviews are conducted simultaneously or at about the same time, the question often arises, is it appropriate to use members of a professional association's accrediting team as external reviewers or external members of a review committee? In almost all cases, the answer is no, since the two reviews are for different purposes and use different criteria for evaluation. In those rare cases where it is done, special care should be taken to ensure that these individuals have the same qualifications as those who would be appointed as external reviewers anyway, i.e., they have experience with and knowledge of graduate programs, and that the two processes—program review and accreditation review—are kept separate.

Scheduling the Reviews

The scheduling of program reviews is critical; more well-meaning plans for comprehensive program review have foundered on an unworkable timetable than on any other obstacle. The frequency of reviews will, of course, vary significantly, depending

upon the institution's size and complexity. However, a cycle of review of every graduate degree program or department every five to seven years is recommended. To do so more often is to create an unmanageable process and risk over-evaluation; to do so less often is to lose track of the content and quality of one's graduate programs. The intensity of the reviews may vary; e.g., each department might have a major review every seven to ten years with an update every three to five. What is essential is that the reviews be cyclical and that they be conducted on a known timetable which continues indefinitely into the future. They should also be incremental, with each review building on the previous cycle's report.

A reasonable length of time for the completion of each review is twelve to eighteen months. It generally takes at least a year to complete the self-study, committee review, and preparation of a final report, with the process sometimes extending into the next academic year. There are, of course, no hard and fast rules in this area; each institution must establish a calendar which is reasonable and realistic for its circumstances.

Any number of unexpected obstacles may delay the process: the department chair changes, institutional data are incorrect, the review committee disagrees on its recommendations, or the external reviewers are unavailable. Since the purpose of the review is to improve the graduate program, however, and not just to go through the process, delays in the schedule may be necessary and perfectly appropriate. A report which is submitted on time but which sits on a shelf unused is of little value.

At the same time, it is important for a program review not to become too protracted; when it does, the information will become outdated and the department indifferent to the result. A process which cannot produce results in a timely way will lose its credibility and therefore its effectiveness.

The order in which programs are reviewed is also important. One factor to consider is the quality of the programs. While there is a natural tendency to want to review all of the perceived poor-quality programs first, this temptation should be resisted, lest program review be seen as a veiled method for eliminating or punishing programs in trouble. Conversely, all the high quality programs should not be reviewed first either, to avoid the impression that the process is nothing more than a whitewash or an attempt to spotlight excellence. For the process to be taken seriously as a fair and equitable procedure, a judicious mix of programs should be selected, based on perceived strengths and weaknesses, for each round of reviews.

Other factors to consider in the choice of programs are: length of time since the last review; compelling financial problems or resource needs; major proposals for curriculum changes; upcoming accreditation or other external reviews; and the desire to have a program reviewed.

At smaller institutions, it may be possible to review programs by administrative or budgetary unit, e.g., all departments in the humanities or in the school of engineering. This has the clear advantage of allowing review of similar programs simultaneously and can help relate the recommendations more directly to that unit's budget allocation process. However, at many institutions, such a plan would be unwieldy.

Multi- and Interdisciplinary Programs

Graduate programs which draw on multiple disciplines or are truly interdisciplinary pose special problems for review. Ideally, all graduate degree programs should be reviewed as individual programs, rather than through departments, since the two are not synonymous. However, given the organization of most universities and colleges, the faculty who teach in such programs and the students who study in them are almost always arranged into academic departments—units which control faculty hiring, student admission, budget, course offerings, and all other elements of a graduate degree.

In spite of the administrative convenience of working through existing departments, however, multi- and interdisciplinary programs need to be reviewed separately. Data and resources should be gathered from all relevant departments, but put together in a single, coherent document. Where possible, much can be gained by reviewing, as a part of the same cycle, one or more departments affiliated with the interdisciplinary program, since they clearly are interdependent. For example, an interdisciplinary program in film and literature might well be reviewed at the same time as cinema and English, or women's studies along with history or sociology. Similarly, programs in related departments which have a strong intellectual affiliation—even if not strictly interdisciplinary—can benefit from simultaneous review, e.g., molecular biology, genetics, and biochemistry.

Structural Components of a Program Review

Although the precise nature of a program review will necessarily vary from one institution to another, a number of key elements should be present in all reviews. They are discussed below in roughly chronological order.

Development of the Review Plan

Before any actual reviews are conducted, the institution, system or other body conducting the review should develop, through established decision-making processes, a plan for program review. This document should describe the purpose of the reviews, the process which will be followed, guidelines for materials to be included, a proposed timetable for reviews, what will be done with the results, and possibly the list of departments or programs that will be reviewed each year. A clear plan, which is developed jointly by all constituencies and is disseminated broadlyin advance of the first review, will help ensure a fair process, with as few surprises as possible. Regardless of the type of process followed, all reviews should be based upon these principles:

- The review should be designed and conducted by the faculty.
- The graduate dean should play a major leadership role in the review process.
- The process should be as open as possible, consistent with the requirement that the rights of individuals be protected.
- The administration should be involved actively and in a positive way in each review.

Administrative Support

Although often overlooked, adequate staffing, computer resources, and general administrative support are necessary to the success of any program review. Program review is not free; faculty and administrators must devote significant blocks of time, secretarial and other support staff must be identified, space and office supplies must be provided, computer time and other institutional research services must be committed, and funds must be set aside to pay external reviewers, if they are used.

Staff and general administrative personnel should be at a high enough professional level to deal with the complexity and sensitivity of the task: e.g., to contact external reviewers, coordinate site visits, serve as a resource person for the department and the review committees, initiate and explain requests for institutional research, and generally keep the process moving. Staff support should be provided centrally, not in

each academic department, in order to keep the findings confidential during the review and to avoid overloading departmental staff, thereby alienating departmental faculty and slowing down the process significantly. While it is appropriate for the department to provide its own staff support for the self-study, the larger review process should be staffed centrally.

Accurate institutional data are critical to the success of any review. Data on academic programs should be developed and maintained centrally wherever possible, but reviewed and evaluated by the faculty of the program based on their knowledge and experience. At many institutions, there is a central office that collects and maintains data on academic programs and which can produce the information needed for a program review, such as admissions, enrollments, sponsored research activity, and number and type of faculty. Where such an office exists, it should be brought into the process early to ensure that it can and will produce the desired reports in a timely fashion, and that the desired data elements are indeed available. A standard report format using a single set of definitions should be developed in advance of the first review in order that each individual report can be generated rapidly and that the data are consistent across programs.

Where data are maintained in various offices for different purposes, e.g., admissions, faculty records, contracts and grants, information will have to be requested separately—but again, using a standard, agreed-upon format. Where there are no central data services available, the university should consider creating a database strictly for program review purposes, or at a minimum designing a standard format and set of definitions for departments to use in reporting their own data. The best information on graduate programs most often comes from a combination of central and departmental sources; either source alone runs the risk of drawing a distorted picture.

In addition to personnel time and research support, funds will be needed for a number of direct expenses: office supplies, honoraria and travel costs for external reviewers, luncheon and other meeting expenses, computer programming, and possibly computer time. Few organizations can cover the cost of thorough program review without specific budget allocations for this purpose.

Departmental Self-study

Once the administrative mechanisms are in place, the first step in a program review is almost always a departmental or program self-study. The self-study is prepared by the faculty of the department and is both descriptive and evaluative; it provides basic information on the nature of the program and gives the faculty's assessment of the program's strengths and weaknesses. It should be clearly written and candid, and should adhere to a standard format and agreed-upon definitions for at least the data portion of the presentation.

A departmental self-study is the department's opportunity to scrutinize itself, to publicize its accomplishments and examine its flaws; it is also a chance—perhaps the

only one—to explain itself and to demonstrate how it is viewed by its peers. A self-study should answer the following five questions:

- What do you do?
- Why do you do it?
- How well do you do it, and who thinks so?
- What difference does it make whether you do it or not?
- How well does what you do relate to why you say you do it?

In order to answer these questions, the information described below should be included, in one form or another, in every self-study. While this is by no means a comprehensive list, it covers the major areas to be addressed. Wherever possible, data should be provided for the previous five years.

Departmental mission and organization: purpose of the department; contribution to the institution's mission; departmental policies and organization.

Program purpose: intellectual place in the discipline; goals and objectives of the graduate program and related research; national and local need for the program.

Departmental size: graduate faculty; support staff; master's students; doctoral students; degrees awarded; instructional and general expense budget; portion of budget used for graduate program(s); amount of externally-funded research; size of other externally-generated funds (e.g., gifts or contracts).

Faculty profile: total number (full/part-time, visiting, tenure/non-tenure track); number of graduate faculty; number of new and retiring full-time faculty during the past five years; average age; sex; ethnicity; percent tenured.

Faculty research and scholarship activity: description of faculty research, scholarship, or creative activity; individual productivity; external grants submitted and funded.

Faculty contribution to graduate program: faculty/ graduate student ratio; average course load; average thesis load per faculty member and distribution across department; distribution of grades in graduate courses; teaching evaluations.

Student profile: admissions criteria; number of applicants and admitted students; actual enrollments (pre- and post-candidacy for doctoral programs); citizenship, average age; sex; ethnicity; part-time/full-time status.

Financial support for graduate students: departmental and institutional funds; percent of students on financial aid; average level of support; ratio of grant-to-loan funds; number of teaching and research assistantships and selection process.

Facilities: space (classroom, research, office); laboratory and instructional equipment; library; computer resources.

Curriculum: degree requirements; program structure; current graduate courses; frequency of course offerings.

Student productivity: number of theses and dissertations produced in last five years; sample dissertation and thesis quality; student publications, exhibitions, and professional presentations; degree completion rates; average time to degree completion.

Programmatic climate: scholarly community; quality of academic advisement; esprit de corps; critical mass of faculty and students; activities related to promoting diversity among students and faculty.

Collateral support: interactions with other departments or units that strengthen the program.

Profile of graduates: number of graduates; job placements; continued contributions to profession or field.

Overall assessment of program: strengths; weaknesses; reputation in the field; goals for improvement.

Use of Questionnaires

Questionnaires completed by students, faculty and program alumni supplement and validate the information and opinions presented in the self-study. A questionnaire to all or a selected sample of current graduate students in the program can elicit important information on their perceptions of the faculty, curriculum, and overall value of the experience. Similarly, individual faculty impressions of the program and of its areas of strength and weakness can paint a picture which statistics alone cannot provide. Finally, a questionnaire to recent alumni of the program may be especially valuable; they are the most likely of the three groups to be objective in their assessments, since they are removed from the program by a few years and have no more vested interest in it. For professional programs especially, alumni and employers of graduates are the best way to assess the usefulness of the degree in the profession. If questionnaires are not used, external reviewers should be asked to meet with the faculty and graduate students (a good idea in any case).

To be informative, the responses to all questionnaires should be anonymous. In addition, they should be designed with care and with enough attention to logistics to ensure success. A number of factors should be considered in determining whether to include one or more questionnaires in the review process: the time required to develop and distribute them and wait for the responses; the likely response rate; the additional paperwork burden on the respondents and the department or review committee; the unique information to be gained; and the expense.

If used, questionnaires should not duplicate information available elsewhere (except for purposes of validation), but should concentrate on that unique knowledge which can be gained only through this method: e.g., student opinions of the quality of the examination or thesis experience, faculty assessments of the overall quality of the research effort, and alumni opinions on which aspects of the program were the most challenging and effective. These opinions will either validate or raise important questions about the statistics reported by the department itself and point toward very specific areas for improvement.

In some cases, departments present the results of questionnaires as part of the self-study; however, it is usually preferable to have such surveys conducted at the institution-wide level—in order to provide adequate staff and financial support and to ensure the confidentiality and objectivity of the process.

Institutions may want to design their own questionnaires or, as an alternative, use those already prepared for this purpose. Under the sponsorship of the Council of Graduate Schools and the Graduate Record Examinations Board, e.g., the Educational Testing Service (ETS) has developed the Graduate Program Self-Assessment Service (GPSAS) to assist institutions with program review. The Service sells sets of standardized questionnaires for current students, current faculty, and alumni which can be analyzed by the institution or by ETS. Questionnaires are available for master's or doctoral programs, and institutions may add specific questions of their own before the questionnaires go out. Such a service cannot substitute for an institution's own investigation and analysis, but it can certainly complement them.

Review Committee

At least one committee should be established to review the departmental self-study and the results of any questionnaires, and to conduct its own investigation and interviews, as needed. There may be one committee to review the program and another (standing) committee to coordinate the process and receive the reports of the review committee and of the department. Alternatively, one committee may perform both functions.

In either case, the committee reviewing the department should be composed primarily of faculty members who are removed enough from it to avoid conflict of interest. Expertise in the field is often left to reviewers brought in from outside the institution. Students are sometimes appointed to serve on review committees, though more often they are members of standing committees that govern the review process and receive the review committee's report.

The review committee typically reads the departmental self-study, and may conduct a one- to two-day site visit in the department, interviewing faculty and students, touring facilities, examining sample student files and dissertations or theses, meeting with the department chair, etc. They may also review any additional materials which the process has elicited (e.g., the results of questionnaires) and interview the relevant deans. Alternatively, external consultants may conduct the site visit and report their findings to the committee.

When the review is complete, the review committee usually prepares a succinct report on its findings, including recommendations for changes or enhancements. This report is most often confidential, except to the department, appropriate deans, and any relevant standing committee.

Departmental Response

Soon after the committee report is submitted, the department should be given a copy and asked to prepare a written response. This provides an opportunity to correct any factual errors and to reply to specific criticisms or conclusions which the review committee has made. Except for factual errors, the review committee may choose not to change its report, but it is essential to keep the department knowledgeable about

the findings and give them an opportunity to comment on the evaluation. If there are multiple reports at this stage, the department should have an opportunity to comment on each report or each version.

External Reviewers

External reviewers are used in a number of different ways. Some review procedures include one or more external reviewers on the internal review committee; others establish an entirely separate external review team; others appoint individual experts to conduct independent evaluations rather than to work as a team; still others consult external reviewers only in rare cases where special expertise is needed which is not available on campus. Most program reviews, however, involve external reviewers in the process in some way.

The purpose of including external reviewers in the review process is to provide input from recognized experts in the discipline, to ensure the objectivity of the process, and to determine where the program fits in the discipline regionally, nationally or internationally. It is difficult to accomplish these goals using only faculty members from the institution involved, even though the process may be a thorough and careful one. External reviewers also lend credence to the final report by contributing their acknowledged expertise and broader point of view. They are, of course, costly to include, and their intellectual orientation and priorities may not necessarily match those of the program being reviewed.

Where external reviewers are appointed as members of the regular review committee, they should be incorporated fully into the process. Where they are brought in after or in addition to an internal review, they should be asked to focus on specific aspects of the program or to answer specific questions, in order to take best advantage of their expertise and not to duplicate the entire review process.

Individuals chosen to be external reviewers can be identified in a number of ways. Most commonly, the department or program in question is asked to submit a list of proposed reviewers—faculty members from other institutions who are well respected in the field but without direct connections to the program in question. They should be "at arm's length" from the program, i.e., not graduates or prior faculty members and not research collaborators, though they may very likely know some of the faculty in the program and be familiar with their research or professional activities.

Reviewers may also be selected independently by the college or graduate dean, or the administrative officer responsible for the review, by contacting professional associations or academic deans and department chairs at institutions with strong reputations in the field. Outside reviewers should be paid an honorarium for their time, plus expenses.

Student Participation

There is great variation in the degree of student participation in graduate program review. In some cases, graduate students may contribute to the self-study, be full

members of the review committees, and serve on the graduate council or standing committee or panel which makes the final recommendations to the deans and the academic vice president. In other cases, they may have nothing to do with the process, except possibly through student evaluations of graduate courses and meetings or interviews conducted by the review team.

Graduate students should participate in the program review process. They should be asked to complete confidential questionnaires where feasible, they should be interviewed collectively and individually by the review committee, and they should participate in the departmental self-study. At the institution-wide level, they should be involved in the entire program review process. Where they are also appointed to serve on review teams or standing panels, they should be full voting members with access to all relevant documents.

Final Report and Recommendations

After the review committee completes its work and the department has had an opportunity to comment, a final report with recommendations should be submitted to the academic vice president and/or graduate dean, with copies to all relevant parties. This report should present the findings of the review committee in light of the self-study and the department's responses to subsequent reports, and make specific recommendations for change. Even though there may have been multiple documents and reports along the way, the program review process should culminate in the preparation of a single, comprehensive report, which can be used to develop a plan of action.

Confidentiality

There seems to be general agreement that some level of confidentiality should apply, particularly to interim reports that arise during the program review. This is usually taken to mean that the reports are for internal use in the university, available only to those who are directly involved in the review.

If possible, the final report and recommendations should be treated in the same way, but since the consequences of these reports, e.g., personnel or program changes, or space reallocations, are obviously public, the reports and recommendations upon which they are based may also become a matter of wider interest. In addition, some program review processes, particularly those established by agencies or organizations external to the university, may mandate certain kinds of distribution for reports. In all cases, some balance should be sought between assurances of confidentiality necessary to encourage the utmost candor from participants, and assurances of openness needed to ensure that those affected by the review will understand the basis for actions taken.

Implementation

Program review does not end with the submission of a final report; indeed, the most important step still lies ahead. Since the purpose of program review is not to produce

a report but to improve graduate programs, implementing the recommendations in a timely way is essential. Turning recommendations into action involves at least the following steps:

a. One or more meetings of the department chair, college or faculty dean, graduate dean, and academic vice president to discuss the recommendations;

b. A memorandum of understanding drawn up by the above about what specific actions are to be taken by whom, and by what deadlines;

c. Discussions of the recommendations with the program faculty for understanding and implementation;

d. Integration of the decisions reached into the institution's long-range academic planning and budget processes.

These steps can be accomplished only through a concerted effort by all of the relevant parties, as well as budget officers, admissions directors, and facilities planners, whose cooperation will be essential for success. The proposed timetable for implementation of each action should be realistic, but not so far into the future as to be irrelevant. Goals for the department to accomplish before the next program review are also in order.

Once the memorandum of understanding is in place, the academic vice president or graduate dean should respond to the review committee, explaining how its recommendations will be implemented. Where committee recommendations are not accepted or the institution is not able to implement them, the reasons for those decisions should also be discussed.

Follow-up

Since most improvements to graduate programs can be made only over a period of time, it is essential to establish a procedure for follow-up to ensure that the memorandum of understanding has been implemented. Approximately one year after the memorandum is signed, or at some other agreed-upon date, the parties responsible for each portion of the implementation should be asked to report on what has been accomplished. If the task is not completed, the relevant faculty and administrators should agree on any additional action to be taken and on a timetable for its completion. This process should be repeated until the implementation is complete, with the final evaluation coming at the next scheduled program review.

Depending on the structure of the process and the content of the recommendations, several possible models may be appropriate for follow-up: the use of an external committee or single reviewer; one or more meetings of the department chair and relevant deans; review by a standing university committee or panel; review by the graduate council; and others. Whatever model is chosen, it must be one that will ensure that action will be taken—action which has the support of the administration and the confidence of the faculty.

Conclusion

Program review is a crucial part of institutional planning and development. It documents the achievements of faculty and students in an academic program, and indicates areas where even greater effort is justified.

This document has attempted to present the critical components of a graduate program review. Among the more important principles stressed here are: that the review may be an internal and/or external process, that it involve evaluations of the quality of the program and the adequacy of resources, that it is forward-looking and objective, and that it result in action.

The role of the graduate dean in program review—whether the reviews are graduate-only or comprehensive—is clear and central. If the reviews are of graduate programs exclusively, then the dean should participate in meeting with the review committee and/or external consultants and receiving and implementing the final report. If the review covers both undergraduate and graduate programs, the graduate dean should be involved at the campus-wide level, formulating the final set of recommendations on the basis of the review process.

The academic review of graduate programs is a time-consuming, costly, and exhausting process. It is also enlightening, stimulating, and gratifying. When done well, it provides an impetus for change and strengthens the quality of graduate programs. Most important of all, it reaffirms for the academic community and the public alike the inherent values of higher education: intellectual honesty, collegiality, and excellence in the pursuit of knowledge.

Appendix

Resources for Conducting Program Reviews

Graduate Program Self-Assessment Service: Sponsored by CGS and the GRE Board, this service provides questionnaires to institutions to review master's or doctoral programs. Separate questionnaires are available for current students, current faculty, and graduates of the program. ETS will provide questionnaires, compile the results, and conduct a sophisticated analysis for the requesting institution, based on a predetermined fee. Or, an institution may purchase the questionnaires directly and conduct its own analysis. All of the questions are multiple choice; however, there is an opportunity for the institution to add questions of its own. For more information, please contact the:

Graduate Program Self-Assessment Service
Educational Testing Service
Box 2878
Princeton, NJ 08541
(609) 734-5966

CGS Consultation Service: The Council of Graduate Schools, through its Consultation Service, will arrange for one of more consultants experienced in the review of graduate programs to provide expertise on the criteria for and process of program review. These individuals are usually graduate deans or other senior administrators who are asked to answer specific questions or to develop an entire review process. The requesting institution pays a modest honorarium plus expenses. For more information, please refer to the brochure on the CGS Consultation Service or contact the:

Council of Graduate Schools
One Dupont Circle, N.W., Suite 430
Washington, D.C. 20036
(202) 223-3791

The ***Higher Education Directory*** is published every year and contains, in addition to institutional listings, a list of many of the professional associations in the various disciplines in the United States. Administrators looking for the names of possible external reviewers for a graduate program might want to contact the relevant

professional association(s) for suggestions. Individual departments, of course, can provide information on their professional associations as well. The *Directory* is available from:

Higher Education Publications, Inc.
2946 Sleepy Hollow Road
Falls Church, VA 22044
(703) 532-2300

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